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(137)

## KATHERINE'S GUARDIAN

By Nellie Cravey Gillmore

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Pierson leaned wearily back in his seat and studied the flying landscape with musing eyes, into which curious little sparks of excitement occasionally flashed.

After a half hour's introspection, he drew from his pocket a crisp, creamy envelope, and taking out a hastily-written sheet of note paper, re-read the following:

"I have asked Katherine Haygood to my house party. Whether you are going to flatter me with your approval of this step, I don't know; but considering that you have been her legal guardian for 10, these many years, I think it is about time you were making each others' acquaintance. Don't you?"

"Kitty is a dear girl—or was when I knew her at college—but a trifle impulsive, and like most impulsive persons, just a bit prejudiced in her views. Consequently, I have not mentioned the fact of your visit, fearing possibly that she might not come if she knew. You will recollect my telling her on several occasions how queerly sensitive she seemed about your relation. Naturally, I imagine, she rather chafes under things—considering what we all know. Vainly enough, I am relying upon my own diplomacy to set things straight when the crucial moment arrives."

The generally astute lawyer found his mind for once, at least, in a mist—now swimming with tumultuous conjectures—now full of vague, strange apprehensions. He returned the letter to his pocket and dropped into a profound reverie.

Presently came the last call for lunch, and Pierson started to his feet half-guiltily. At the entrance to the dining-car he came face to face with a tailor-made young lady in blue, whose fluffy, sun-gold curls and great penetrating gray eyes went through him like a stimulant.

For certain unaccountable reasons he loitered through the intervening cars on the return to his own, but without comprehension. Half an hour later the train creaked to a standstill, where it remained through the major part of the afternoon. The engine had given out, and at least a hundred miles from assistance!

Pierson left the car, and began to pace restlessly up and down in the brisk, keen air. Pretty soon a number of other passengers followed suit, and the young lawyer felt his breath come in a swift, jerky fashion as he recognized the young lady in blue.

Fifty yards or more up-grade was a dingy little depot, and thither they all drifted, in ones, twos and threes, as relief seemed a thing of the dim future.

The girl left her grip and parasol inside and went back out on the plat-



"If I Can Be of Any Assistance to You—"

form and sat down on a dilapidated bench at the end of it.

Pierson resumed his pacing, noting as he passed and repassed her, that she was beginning to look a little tired and decidedly anxious. Once or twice, as he came up, she almost opened her lips to speak, then looked away, reconsidering. But after awhile, when he stopped near her to relight a cigar, she found courage to say: "I beg your pardon, but could you tell me when we are likely to get away from this place?" There was a faint dash of color in either cheek that deepened perceptibly as she spoke.

"Yes, a telegram has just been received. We can't possibly expect to have an engine before midnight!"

"Not before midnight!" The girl paled. "Then I must send a—a telegram or something right away," she added uneasily. "Do you think—"

"If I can be of any assistance to you—"

"I shall be greatly obliged if you will," she broke in quickly. "Miss Elsie Deering, Plainfield, New Jersey. Is the address. I will just wire the delay—that will be all."

"And the signature?" he asked apologetically.

Miss Haygood flushed and bit her lip. "Of course," she laughed, "how

stupid of me. Simply sign it: 'Katherine'."

Pierson turned quickly and made his way toward the office. Inside, he hastily dashed off two messages. One read:

"Can't reach Plainfield before to-morrow evening. Katherine."

The other:

"Until further notice, I am to be known only as Mr. Jack Smith. Explain later. Dick."

He sent both to the same address and returned to Miss Haygood with the assurance that everything was all right.

"As long as we are to be visitors in the same house," he ventured tentatively, "I hope you will allow me to look after you for the rest of the journey."

The girl's lips parted in a transient smile, revealing a fleeting glimpse of white.

"I am afraid I shall be a great deal of trouble—to judge by the beginning," she remarked.

"I am sorry all troubles are not half so pleasant," he returned quickly.

"That sounds stereotyped, Mr.—"

"Smith."

She regarded him curiously for a second. "Elsie did not write me that there was to be a Mr. Smith," she said.

"As a matter of fact, I did not know it myself until the last minute. My cousin has been insisting for a long time, and though anxious and eager enough, I was afraid almost to the last that I should not be able to get away."

"Probably there is a strong attraction somewhere."

"There is. Otherwise I should not have agreed to travel all the way from San Francisco to New Jersey and back again for just a week's vacation."

Miss Haygood found herself flushing absurdly all at once. "You live in San Francisco?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Do you know any—many people there?"

"Quite a number, I should say."

"Any—any lawyers?" The red kept coming into her cheeks as she talked.

"I should rather think so, considering that I belong to that disreputable class myself."

"Have you ever heard of a—Mr. Richard Pierson?" she asked, abruptly, after a little.

"I know that gentleman quite well." His eyes twinkled, but his tone was casual. "Do you know him?"

"Unfortunately, yes—in a fashion. He happens to be a sort of a legal guardian. My father died out there several years ago, leaving some property, and to look after it and me—Mr. Pierson."

"In consequence of which, you have small love for him. I see."

"It certainly isn't very agreeable to have to go to him for every cent—to have to ask his advice about this, that and the other. Why, in case I decide to marry before I am 21, he will have to be consulted first."

After a silence, Miss Haygood turned to her companion and said: "Tell me, is he good-looking, or nice, or pleasant—in any way?"

"Dick isn't a bad sort. I believe you would like him better if you knew him."

"I have not said that I disliked him." The girl smiled, and suggested that he take her inside.

Mr. Richard Pierson, reclining against the green plush back of a parlor-car was returning to San Francisco. He had been several sorts of a fool, after all, he thought, to commit himself to such a stupid deception. It was clear enough, in his honest opinion, that he had made a consummate ass of himself in more than one respect. It was also perfectly evident that Katherine Haygood did not care the snap of her finger for him. Even the abhorrent guardian stood a better chance by long odds than did he in his foolish masquerade.

Arriving in San Francisco, he went at once to his apartments. The first thing to greet him on entering was his faithful valet. The next, a dainty blue envelope, handed him by the oriental. He glanced quickly at the address, reddening like a school-boy as he recognized the familiar handwriting of his ward. He tore it open eagerly and read:

"Plainfield, N. J., June 5.—My Dear Guardian: I don't know why I should write to you at all, as you hardly ever see fit to notice my letters by more than a casual acknowledgment. However, as there is something particular about which I must ask you, we will let that pass."

"To go at once to the point, what is your opinion of Mr. Jack Smith, your friend and contemporary? He professes to admire you very much, and as you are such great confidants, doubtless you will know before long all the details of our meeting, etc."

"As you are coming to St. Louis within the year, we can then discuss business matters, so there is no necessity to write further. Sincerely, Katherine Haygood."

Pierson read the letter half a dozen times before returning it to the envelope. A curious little smile developed about his lips as he made a rather hasty toilet and sat down at his desk to write an answer. He began with a paternal flourish:

"My Dear Little Girl: If you want my private opinion on the subject of Mr. Jack Smith, he is an idiot, pure and simple."

"The details of your meeting, etc., you say. Am I to understand by the 'etc.'—What am I to understand?"

"I hope you have not been so hasty as to become unduly interested in this stranger, of whom you know little or nothing and whom you have never seen but once in your life."

"I shall make a special point of seeing you on the date of your twenty-first birthday, in your own home. However, let me hear from you at once in reply to this."

"Your sincere friend and guardian, Richard Pierson."

In due time came an answer:

"St. Louis, June 18.—Mr. Richard Pierson, San Francisco: Dear Sir: It is certainly beyond my ingenuity to conceive why you should have sent me such an unwarrantably insolent letter. I am not aware of having requested your advice about anything, nor do I care to consider it at all."

"I don't care what you say about Mr. Smith. In my opinion, he is a man and a gentleman, and quite worthy of any woman's—anyone's—interest."

"Very respectfully, Katherine Haygood."

The trip to St. Louis was uneventful enough in itself, but as long as he lived, Pierson thought he should never forget the tumult of emotion that held him in grip.

From his hotel he went at once to the home of his ward.

When Miss Haygood came into the parlor her cheeks were tinged faintly with excitement.

Pierson rose and extended his hand in some embarrassment. "You probably did not expect to see me," he commenced lamely.

The girl crimsoned to the tips of her ears as a flash from the firelight showed her features.

"I'm afraid I did not," she replied, in a tremulous little fashion as she indicated a chair.

"And of course you are extremely disappointed that your guardian—that



"I Came Because I Loved You," He Interrupted Softly.

you—that I—" he blundered on helplessly.

"As usual, I suppose, he was too busy at the last minute to get away, so sent you—"

"As his representative, yes, and—" He broke off again, turning red and white by turns.

Miss Haygood stiffened visibly. "He need not have annoyed you with this unpleasant business," she said.

"It is a great pleasure to me to be of any service—to you, Kitty," he said, boldly.

She turned away quickly to hide the crimson that kept pouring into her cheeks.

He was silent for a moment. Then he bent over her and his hands slipped down till they rested on her loosened sun-gold curls.

"You came as his—"

"I came because I loved you," he interrupted softly.

She did not answer, and his palms crept down to her blood-burnt cheeks. "Was it any use?" he asked.

"You would not have come—if you had thought otherwise," she said, after a little pause.

"And you don't object to telling me why it was you would never let me say all this before?"

"Now that my freedom is here, no—I do not object. There was always a foolish whim in our families—my guardian's and mine—that—" She looked up with a sudden arch expression. "He has told you already."

"Yes."

"That is all past now—by mutual consent."

He took both her hands and held them tightly in their own.

"Will you take me for better or for worse?" he asked, touching her hair with his lips.

"I will," she answered steadily.

"And you love me, not because—"

"I love you because—you are you," she interposed.

"And to-day, I have brought you your freedom. To-day, you are rid of me for good. You need never be annoyed again by having to come to me for every cent—"

The girl stood up quickly, a new light breaking in on her mind all at once.

"You!" she cried.

"I am still—I," he said smiling. "Have you changed your mind? It is a woman's prerogative, you know."

He drew from his pocket a bulky package of papers and held it to her. "With these," he continued, "I relinquish my guardianship and give you your liberty."

She did not move or speak for a full minute. Then, with an indescribable little gesture, she drew back, shaking her head, and into her eyes came a certain wonderful light that comes into all women's eyes sometime. "You had better keep them, hadn't you?" she said in a little half whisper.

"I really would not know what to do with them," she stammered, with rose flowers in her cheeks, "for—I don't in the least—care to be—free."

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